

RESIDUAL STACK SHUTDOWN ENERGY STORAGE AND USAGE FOR A FUEL CELL POWER SYSTEM

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to fuel cell systems, and more particularly, to storing of residual fuel cell stack shutdown energy.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Fuel cell systems include a fuel cell stack that produces electrical energy based on a reaction between a hydrogen-based feed gas (e.g., pure hydrogen or a hydrogen reformate) and an oxidant feed gas (e.g., pure oxygen or oxygen-containing air). The hydrogen-based feed gas and oxidant feed gas are supplied to the fuel cell stack at appropriate operating conditions (i.e., temperature and pressure) for reacting therein. The proper conditioning of the feed gases is achieved by other components of the fuel cell stack to provide the proper operating conditions.

[0003] A fuel cell stack will generally contain residual amounts of hydrogen and oxidant feed gases after shutdown. This potential electrical energy is lost if it is not used or stored. Accordingly, a need exists for a system able to use or store this potential electrical energy.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0004] The present invention provides a fuel cell system having a storage device for storing the electrical energy resulting from the shutdown of a fuel cell stack. The reacting of residual gases creates this electrical energy which can be used to power an electric motor for a compressor during subsequent fuel cell start-up. Alternatively, the stored energy could be used to power resistive heating plates which warm the fuel cell stack to assist with cold start-ups. The continual reacting of the residual hydrogen gases after shutdown also enables the fuel cell stack to be purged with air.

[0005] Further areas of applicability of the present invention will become apparent from the detailed description provided hereinafter. It should be understood that the detailed description and specific examples, while indicating the preferred embodiment of the invention, are intended for purposes of illustration only and are not intended to limit the scope of the invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0006] The present invention will become more fully understood from the detailed description and the accompanying drawings, wherein:

[0007] Figure 1 is a schematic illustration of a fuel cell system including a residual electrical energy storage device according to the present invention;

[0008] Figure 2 is a schematic illustration of a fuel cell system including a residual electrical energy storage device according to an alternative embodiment of the present invention; and

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0009] The following description of the preferred embodiments is merely exemplary in nature and is in no way intended to limit the invention, its application, or uses.

[0010] Referring now to Figure 1, a fuel cell system 10 is shown. The fuel cell system 10 includes a fuel cell stack 12 coupled to a hydrogen supply unit 14 and an oxygen supply unit 16, a controller 18, a purge blower system 19 and a residual electrical energy storage device 20. The fuel cell stack 12 produces electrical power to power an electrical load or loads 22. The electrical load(s) 22 can include an electric motor, lights, heaters or any other type of electrically powered components.

[0011] The hydrogen supply unit 14 supplies a hydrogen feed gas to the fuel cell stack 12. In the case of the hydrogen feed gas being pure hydrogen, the hydrogen supply unit 14 includes a storage vessel and the associated plumbing and controls (not shown) to supply the hydrogen to the fuel cell stack 12. In the case of the hydrogen feed gas being a hydrogen reformate, the hydrogen supply unit 14 includes a storage vessel for storing a base fuel and the components, plumbing and controls (not shown) required to dissociate the base fuel into the hydrogen containing feed gas and to supply the hydrogen feed gas to the fuel cell stack 12. A valve 24b coupled to the controller 18 regulates the flow of the hydrogen feed gas through the fuel cell stack 12. A corresponding valve 24a is in communication with the controller 18 and enables the controller 18 to “bottle up” the hydrogen feed gas within the fuel cell stack 12 during

shutdown. When the valve 24b is opened with the valve 24a being closed, the anode flow channels of the fuel cell system 10 can be purged by the purge blower system 19.

[0012] The oxygen supply unit 16 provides an oxidant feed gas to the fuel cell stack 12. The oxidant feed gas is generally provided as oxygen-rich air. Thus, the oxygen supply unit 16 generally includes a compressor 26, an electric motor 28 and plumbing (generally shown) required to supply the oxidant feed gas to the fuel cell stack 12. A valve 30b in communication with the controller 18 regulates the flow of the oxidant feed gas into the fuel cell stack 12. Similarly, a corresponding valve 30a is in communication with the controller 18 and enables the controller 18 to “bottle up” the oxidant feed gas within the fuel cell stack 12 during shutdown. In particular, when the valve 30b is opened with the valve 30a being closed, the cathode flow channels of the fuel cell system 10 can be purged by the purge blower system 19.

[0013] The controller 18 is coupled to the valves 24a, 24b and 30a, 30b to initiate a reaction in the fuel cell stack 12 upon a start-up command from the input 32. Specifically, the controller 18 engages the electric motor 28 and opens the valves 24, 30 such that the hydrogen feed gas and oxidant feed gas enter the fuel cell stack 12 to begin the production of electrical energy. When the controller 18 receives a shutdown command from the input 32, it closes all of the valves 24a, 24b, 30a and 30b, such that the fuel cell stack 12 is completely bottled up. In a shutdown situation, there is still remaining hydrogen and oxidant feed gases in the fuel cell stack 12, and thus, remaining residual capacity to

generate electricity. The purge blower system 19 includes a motor 36 which can be powered by the electrical energy from the electrical energy storage device 20 or an alternative power supply (not shown). The motor 36 in turn drives a blower 38 in the purge blower system 19. The blower 38 introduces air into the fuel cell stack 12 through a first purge valve 40a coupled to the hydrogen feed gas inlet and a second purge valve 40b in communication with the oxidant feed gas inlet. The purge blower system 19 ensures that remaining water and reactants are removed prior to a subsequent start up of the fuel cell system 10.

[0014] The residual electrical energy storage device 20 is coupled to the fuel cell stack 12 to store this remaining electricity generated by the remaining hydrogen and oxidant feed gases. The residual electrical energy storage device 20 can be any device capable of storing energy, such as, for example but not limited to, a battery, a capacitor, or an ultra-capacitor. The energy stored in the residual electrical energy storage device 20 can be used on start-up for powering the electric motor 28, of the oxygen supply unit as the electric motor 28 is one of the largest parasitic loads in the fuel cell system 10. This electrical energy may also be used to power motor 36 of the purge blower system 19. In addition, with reference now to Figure 2, the energy from the residual electrical energy storage device 20 can alternatively be used to power resistive heating plates 44, as shown in Figure 2. The resistive heating plates 44 provide heat to the fuel cell stack 12 to facilitate faster system response time during cold start-ups.

[0015] It is to be understood that these alternative uses for the stored energy are not limiting and that the stored energy can be used for a variety of different purposes either within the fuel cell system or for other components. A further advantage of using the residual electrical energy storage device 20 to recapture the residual energy from the fuel cell stack 12 during shutdown is that it enables the fuel cell stack 12 to be purged with air from the purge blower system 19. Typically, the fuel cell stack 12 has to be purged with nitrogen because of the remaining hydrogen feed gas. By fully reacting the remaining hydrogen feed gas, the fuel cell stack 12 can be purged using air instead, which greatly reduces the cost and complexity of the fuel cell system 10.

[0016] The description of the invention is merely exemplary in nature and, thus, variations that do not depart from the gist of the invention are intended to be within the scope of the invention. Such variations are not to be regarded as a departure from the spirit and scope of the invention.